DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 156 661 SP 012 841

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TITLE Sport and the Inmates Dilemma: Time to Kill or Time to Live.
PUB DATE May 78
NOTE 25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference, North American Society for the Psychology of Sport and Physical Activity (Tallahassee, Florida, May 21-24, 1978).

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Athletics; *Attitudes; Foreign Countries; Institutionalized Persons; *Physical Activities; *Prisoners
IDENTIFIERS *Canada

ABSTRACT

Interviews were conducted with twenty-eight male and female inmates housed in Canadian maximum and medium security prisons to determine their sports backgrounds and values and the role of sports in their prison lives. As youngsters, the large majority of the subjects interviewed had participated in organized competitive sports. Sport value problems associated with competition and aggression appeared to be intensified among inmates, especially for the males. Sports did however appear to play a vital role in the process of coping with prison time. The similarities between prisoners forced to deal with their imprisonment and "ordinary" people forced to cope with life, time, frustration, loss, and failure, suggest directions for further research and research utilization. (Author/MJB)

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Sport and The Inmates Dilemma:

Time to Kill or Time to Live

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Running head: Sport and Inmates

SP 012 841

SPORT AND THE INMATES' DILEMMA

TIME TO KILL OR TIME TO LIVE *

> "the tree outside the window, on the other side of the bars, buds, sheds, buds and sheds again as I sit watching and waiting". (Caro Walters - Women's Pen, 1977).

Sport, it has often been claimed, diverts one from a life of crime. It reportedly "keeps kids out of trouble", "builds character", "gets rid of aggression". Childhood games and youth sports do have the potential to focus a child's attention on meaningful nondelinquent leisure time activity. However, competitively structured games and sports, particularly where numerical outcomes are emphasized, also tend to elicit and reinforce competition, aggression and non empathetic responses (Orlick, 1978a; Slack, 1978; Gelfand and Hartmann, 1975; Berkowitz, 1972; Ryan, 1972; Rausch, 1965). What kinds of sports backgrounds do prison inmates have? What are their sport values? What role does sport play in their daily lives? These are some of the question this preliminary investigation set out to explore.

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* Appreciation is extended to the inmates, recreation staff and administrators of the two prisons involved in the study, Cathy Foley, Eva Horvath, Alain Lavoie, Sally Olsen, Yves Perron, Grey Seamans, and particularly Randy Swedburg, Chief of Physical Education and Recreation for Federal Penitentiaries, for making this study possible.

Method

There are 54 federal prisons in Canada, all of which house prisoners with sentences in excess of two years. Twenty eight inmates housed in two such institutions were "randomly" selected by prison personnel to participate in this preliminary investigation. They had been convicted of a wide range of crimes (e.g. drug trafficing, embezzlement, armed robbery, assault, and murder). One criteria for involvement was that they not be considered too great a threat to participate in an individual interview. Fourteen of the inmates resided in a maximum security prison for women and the other fourteen resided in a medium security prison for men. An interview was designed to assess sports backgrounds, sports values, and the role of sports in the lives of inmates housed in federal penitentiaries. A series of open ended questions served as a basic guide for the interview.

The interview generally lasted from 30-40 minutes and was flexible enough to take off in any direction. This allowed the principal interviewer (as well as graduate assistants) to ask about the role of sport in prison and also find out about how prisoners cope with "time", to ask about how sports are played on the "inside" and also find out how they are played against the outside. A well conducted interview can yield some very rich responses, much more than is directly asked

(Bugental, 1966; Lofland, 1971; Orlick, 1974). By developing rapport and showing a genuine interest in what is being said, feelings usually begin to unfold. People generally begin to relay their perception of the world and reveal those issues which are important to them. It should be noted that the responses to the interview questions outlined in this paper were accepted at face value and reported as such.

Results and Discussion

The results of this study have been presented in percentage form, question by question. Some of the most interesting open ended responses are also presented and discussed in the text following the Sports Questionnaire Results. These response have been categorized under Sports Background, Sport values, and The Role of Sport in Prison.

Sports Questionnaire Results

Percentage Responses

1. Did you have gym in school?

Female	Male
yes (14) 100%	yes (11) 79%

2. Did you enjoy it?

Female	Male
yes (11) 79%	yes (10) 71%

3. How were you compared to the other kids?

Female	Male
above average (9) 64%	above average (4) 28%
average (3) 21%	average (6) 43%
below average (1) 7%	

4. Did you play pick games (street games) in the community?

Female	Male
yes (9) 64%	yes (13) 93%
no (5) 35%	no (1) 7%

5. Did you ever play on any organized teams as a kid? If yes what?

Female	Male
yes (13) 93%	yes (10) 71%
no (1) 7%	no (3) 21%

Main Sports

Female		Male	
Volleyball	(6) 43%	baseball	(7) 50%
Basketball	(5) 35%	hockey	(5) 35%
Softball	(5) 35%	football	(4) 28%
		soccer	(4) 28%

6. When did you first start playing? (organized sports)

Age	Female	Male
12-14	(3) 21%	(2) 14%
10-11	(2) 14%	(3) 21%
8-9	(1) 7%	(3) 21%
5-7	(6) 43%	(3) 21%

7. How (or why) did you decide to choose that sport?

	Female	Male
enjoyed it	(7) 50%	(2) 14%
was good at it	(4) 28%	-
nothing else	(3) 21%	(3) 21%
friends played	(2) 14%	(2) 14%
"In thing"	-	(2) 14%

8. How long did you keep it up?

	Female	Male
stopped after high school	(5) 35%	(1) 7%
14-15 yrs old	(2) 14%	(5) 35%
still play	(4) 28%	(5) 35%
stopped after 1 year	(1) 7%	(1) 7%

9. How would you compare yourself to other kids that were on those teams?

	Female	Male
one of the best	(2) 14%	(2) 14%
good/above average	(6) 43%	(6) 43%
average	(3) 21%	(4) 28%
no response	(3) 21%	(2) 14%

10. Did you ever receive awards or special recognition in sports? (medals, ribbons, trophies, most valuable player etc.)

	Female	Male
yes	(11) 79%	(11) 79%
no	(3) 21%	(3) 21%

11. What did you like best about playing sports?

	Female	Male
competition	(3) 21%	(7) 50%
winning	(2) 14%	(2) 14%
roughness	(2) 14%	(3) 21%
accomplishment	(2) 14%	(3) 21%
fitness	(2) 14%	(2) 14%
fun	(2) 14%	(3) 21%
acceptance	(1) 7%	(2) 14%

12. What did you like least?

	Female	Male
losing	(2) 14%	(4) 28%

13. Did you have any sports heroes as a kid?

	Female	Male
hockey players	-	(10) 71%
boxers	-	(4) 28%
individuals sports	(5) 35%	(0)
none	(7) 71%	(3) 21%

14. Were your experiences in sport good or bad generally? (explain)

	Female	Male
good	(13) 93%	(14) 100%

15. Were you ever cut from a team? (explain when - how did it effect you?)

	Female	Male
no	(11) 79%	(11) 79%
yes	(2) 14%	(3) 21%

16. Did you ever start playing with a team and then quit? If yes why do you think you quit? Has that effected you since?

	Female	Male
no	(10) 71%	(7) 50%
yes	(3) 21%	(4) 28%

17. As a kid what did you think was the most important thing in sports?

	Female	Male
winning	(5) 35%	(4) 28%
fun	(2) 14%	(2) 14%
being good	(2) 14%	(1) 7%

18. What do you think is most important now?

	Female	Male
breaks up the time	(5) 35%	(5) 35%
fitness/health	(4) 28%	(3) 21%
enjoyment	(3) 21%	(1) 7%
winning	(0)	(3) 21%
do something well	(2) 14%	(2) 14%

19. How do you usually feel when you play your sport? (or sports)

	Female	Male
good/great/happy	(6) 43%	(7) 50%
excited/elated/ alive	(4) 28%	(3) 21%

20. Does anything else give you the same kind of feeling?

	Female	Male		Female	Male
drugs	(3) 21%	(3) 21%	freedom	(1) 7%	-
making love/sex	(2) 14%	(3) 21%	an affair	(1) 7%	-
yes-wouldn't say (crime)?	(1) 7%	(1) 7%	partying		(1) 7%

21. What sports or physical activities do you like to do best now?

	Female		Male
volleyball	(7) 50%	weights	(5) 35%
baseball	(7) 50%	running	(5) 35%
Tai chi	(4) 28%	floor hockey	(4) 28%
basketball	(3) 21%	ice hockey	(4) 28%
ping-pong	(3) 21%		

22. How often do you take part in physical activities now (hours per week)?

	Female	Male
10-12 hrs	(3) 21%	(9) 64%
5-7 hrs	(8) 57%	(1) 7%
3 hrs or less	(3) 21%	(4) 28%

23. What sports do you like to watch most?

	Female	Male
hockey	(7) 50%	(9) 64%
boxing	(0)	(4) 28%
football	(5) 35%	(4) 28%
baseball	(3) 21%	(2) 14%
ind. sports	(4) 28%	(3) 21%

24. How often do you watch them (hours per week)?

	Female	Male
15-20 hrs	-	(3) 21%
10-12 hrs	-	(4) 28%
8-10 hrs	(1) 7%	-
6 hrs	-	(2) 14%
3 hrs	(3) 21%	(1) 7%
1 hr	(1) 7%	(1) 7%

25. What is your feeling about the program offered to you here?

	Female	Male
pretty good	(5) 35%	(5) 35%
not good	(4) 28%	(4) 28%
in between	(5) 35%	(5) 35%

26. Are sports played any differently on the inside? (compared to the outside). If yes, pursue how (specifics)

	Female		Male	
yes (rougher, more competitive)	(4)	28%	(8)	57%
no	(8)	57%	(2)	14%

27. How far will people go in order to win?

	Female		Male	
hurt others	(2)	14%	(7)	50%
all out, but not to main	(3)	21%	(3)	21%

28. Is there anything you would like to see changed to make the program here better? If yes, what?

(For overall response - see discussion under Sport Values).

Sports Background

As youngsters, 85 percent of the 28 inmates interviewed participated in organized competitive community sports or on organized competitive school teams and slightly over half (57%) viewed themselves as above average in sports ability in comparison to their peers at that time. When asked what they had liked best about playing sports, the most predominant open ended response for both males and females was "The competition". When asked, "As a kid what did you think was the most important thing in sports", the most predominant open ended response for both males and females was "winning". As one inmate expressed it "As a kid it was most important to win.. to show that I was a tough gay.. That I wasn't a loser".

Sport values

Although both males and females felt that "for most inmates", winning is most important in sports and playing fair is least important (of the five choices offered), the females clearly take a more humanistic approach to their games. The majority of the females interviewed felt that

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Insert Table 1 about here

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games were not played any differently "on the inside". As one woman expressed it, "sports aren't really played any differently among the inmates (as compared to games played by females outside) but the games are a lot rougher when we play against outside teams to protect the institutes reputation (not that we want it). Still there's no fights". Another woman stated, "when playing outside teams you must show them you're good at something.. but there's a different atmosphere playing games in here.. they're friendly.. and fun". Females tend to draw the line in terms of how far they will go to win even against the outside. "You do your darndest.. put your heart into it.. but don't try to hurt anyone. It is important to win, so you go all out and hustle, but not to hurt anyone".

The majority of the men interviewed felt that games were rougher, more aggressive and played with more and harder physical contact "on the inside" and this was magnified even

further when playing against outside teams. As one man expressed it, "if an outside team came in they'd be wiped.. one came last year.. big rumble". Another man stated, "we play the same as on the street except everyone is out to win and it's rougher". When playing against an outside team the person on the inside "is really out to win", partially to prove that they are "good at something" and partially because "you get ribbed by inmates watching if you lose".

In short, the problems on the outside seem to be intensified on the inside, particularly among the males. The intensity of the violence tends to be greater and very few of the older prisoners (e.g. over 35) seem to participate at all ("a lot of old timers do a lot of time in their cells"). One prisoner stated that not enough people participate because of the violence, and cited vicious fights in floor hockey as a specific example. Another said he stopped playing floor hockey "cause it was too dangerous. Some people would break your leg or put you in the hospital". "You can't vent your frustrations anywhere else. You can't be charged if you fight while in a game". This feeling was reiterated by several others, "only outlet you got", "only place you can get out your frustrations without getting charged". Because of this several of the male inmates interviewed felt that the fights were good and "The refs won't break it up (a fight) until they go down on the floor.. guards don't come in.. it's

up to the inmates to handle it".

In the men's prison there is also a problem with abuse of equipment, "Inmates take stuff to their cell and don't return it" (e.g. boxing gloves). Sometimes this is done "so nobody else can use them". Other times inmates "get pissed off at the system" and "destroy equipment".

Most men watch sports, primarily hitting sports (e.g. hockey, football, plus boxing) for about 10 hours a week. There is an unwritten inmate policy which ensures that if there is a sports program on TV, that channel is watched regardless of what else is on.. "even if only one person wants to watch the sports".

Although we did have a large enough sample to equate sports values with crimes committed there may be some relationship. One male prisoner in for assault, said what he liked best about sports was "getting aggressive and not stopping". Several other men in for similar offenses also "got off" on the aggression in sport. One female said she was cut from a hockey team as a youth because she was "apparently too rough" while another was cut for fighting in basketball. She liked watching roller derby and ice hockey ("for the fights"). Although there were many clear examples of inmates liking physical aggression and intense competition, the range of opinion with respect to personal acceptance of these types of behaviors seemed to vary as much as with any other group. Some inmates clearly disliked aggression and competition.

When asked to rank the five forced choice options listed in Table 1, most male prisoners responded that having fun and health & fitness were most important "for them now" as sports participants. Most female prisoners responded that health and fitness and playing fair were priority items for them now.

The Role of Sport in Prison

What is the most important psychological function of sport in prison? Probably diversion.. the opportunity to get totally immersed in something which for the moment "frees you" from the feeling of serving time. Responses to the open-ended question, "what is most important for you in sports now" , yielded, "breaks up the time" as a predominant response for both males and females. "It's a filler", "something to do", "gotta keep occupied in here or go bonkers". When you really get absorbed in something like playing a game, "it's as if you're not doing time", "you forget where you are", "takes your mind off things". Sleep, once you are "really asleep", can reportedly serve a similar purpose, but sleep is time to kill and sports can be time to live. They can be something to look forward to. For some inmates sports are "really a lift, a place to get focused, to expend energy, release tension, a physical outlet, a place to do something well, a sense of achievement, a sense of control, a little excitement, a place to socialize with others". One woman said, "sports

is one place where I hold my own... at least I was good at something". This feeling of sport giving a sense of accomplishment was echoed by several other participants. Occasionally, sports also provide an opportunity for some people to go outside the institution. For those who are really involved in sports, they play a vital role in the coping process and in maintaining some semblance of quality of life within the prison. It's one of the few times inmates "feel good, elated, excited, strong, alive, keen, involved, revitalized". Only sex and drugs ("being stoned", "shooting junk") and perhaps for some, the excitement of crime itself, gave certain prisoners the same kind of feeling.

As one woman expressed it, "the overall prison program is garbage.. it sucks.. there is nothing to learn and nothing to do. As for sports, the program is good". One young lady said she had been extremely active in sports in high school until she turned to drugs and dropped out of school. She only began playing sports again once imprisoned. One of the main reasons she came back out was because of the personal encouragement from one member of the recreation staff. The fact that he was "very open and receptive to change" and treated them "like human beings", was greatly appreciated. However, there were many suggestions for improvement, the most common of which included more for those not active, more equipment, more variety, more individual activities, more people

participating. Many inmates requested more opportunity for self paced activities which do not have bodily contact. Individual sports,fitness clubs, raquets sports, as well as cooperative games (Orlick, 1978b) which reduce aggression and severity of outcome fit into this category. Some of these activities, as well as quiet leisure activities, might work well with lesser skilled inmates or those who are reluctant to get involved in the present program.

When asked if they would like to see anything changed to make the program better, many prisoners expressed the feeling that there was not enough choice in what they could do or play. Choice is vitally important, particularly in institutions where people can easily begin to feel helpless (as if nothing they do has an effect on outcomes). Depression roles forth from feelings of helplessness whereas some sense of control over any aspect of one's world tends to lift depression (Seligman, 1975; Deci, 1977). In addition, individuals feel more committed and involved in those activities to which they have had some say in formulating. So the more involved inmates become in teaching one another, sharing their capabilities, selecting options, "directing their own course" so to speak, the more successful the program is likely to be. Certainly this is no easy task where power cliques of inmates (or guards) "call all the shots", but it may be possible to get more grass roots involvement and thus improve programs.

The democratic behavior modification approach outlined by Botterill (1977) where players have direct input as to what is "appropriate" behavior would certainly be worth a try in attempting to alleviate some of the problems evidenced in prison games. We do know that, "I don't have the time to participate".. does not hold water in this setting. They have nothing but time. The challenge is to make constructive use of the time, to offer interesting options, to involve inmates more directly in conducting their own programs and controling their own behavior.

Future Directions

It would be interesting to explore the question of whether inmates were involved in delinquency or crime at the same time that they were involved in organized sports and to look more closely at the whole area of coping. Some prisoners spoke of transcending their physical beings as a means of coping with prison life. "I'm not really here. My body's here but not my head". "I'm here but I'm not here". Caro Walters reflects this feeling in a poem she wrote in Women's Pen.

> Latin, drawing, learning? Not today.
> Spend the hours writing mental stories, watching the movie in my mind. Tripping in the constellation of my fertile imagination.

Fantasies, memories, projections to some future time keep some people alive. "In here I prefer the dream to the reality".

A seasoned woman prisoner whom I interviewed indicated that at one time ("in the old days") the younger women (just

in) would sometimes confide in the more sympathetic veterans about coping problems, "doing easy time" and so on. "This rarely happens any more." It would seem that if an acceptable mechanism could be set up for sharing views and techniques for constructively coping with "time", and "making it on the outside", it would be of immense value. The role that sport can play in the coping process, in promoting cooperation, and as a means of learning coping stratagies, is wide open for investigation.

For those who might carry out some of this research I would like to point out that, prisoners are simply imprisoned people, partially of their own making, partially of societies making. They are much more like you and I than they are different and we can learn from them as they can learn from us and each other, particularly about the whole process of coping (with life, time, frustration, loss, failure). After talking with various inmates and reading their writings and poetry, I was left with the feeling that there is a tremendous amount of untapped talent within those 4 walls, (8 walls? 10 walls?). I felt a special kind of human strength and sensitivity flowing from some of the women I interviewed. Perhaps it is related to the process of learning how to cope with imprisonment and hard times. Perhaps it is related to the hidden reserve of strength witnin each of us. It is our own mental prisons which seem to encase us and restrict us, as much as physical prisons. Fortunately freedom from mental prisons lies within our own

grasp because each of us has the potential to control our own thinking, and thereby can make the present and future shine a little brighter.

I am dwelling in darkness
like a bat in a cave
My mind wanders like a lost spaceship
looking for its destination
A cold wind touched me
leaving little bumps
but not a stir I make
for I am scared
of loneliness
of darkness
Who's there to comfort me?
no one.. I am alone
I am awake, awake, wide awake
but the loneliness disappears
and I fear no darkness
I become strong, hold myself high
Like an eagle
soaring its destiny

(Irene Savoyard - Women's Pen, 1977)

Table 1

Male and Female Prisoners Rankings of What Is Most Important In Sports

(1 = most important, 5 = least important)

Forced Choice Options	"For you now"				"For most inmates"				"For you as a Kid"			
	final ranking		(ind. ranks averaged)		final ranking		(ind. ranks averaged)		final ranking		(ind. ranks averaged)	
	male	female	male	female	male	female	male	female	male	female	male	female
beating others	5	5	3.8	4.6	2	3	2.5	2.7	3	5	3.2	3.8
winning	4	3	3.4	2.7	1	1	1.7	2.0	2	2	2.3	1.8
playing fair	3	2	3.2	2.6	5	5	4.1	3.1	3	3	3.2	2.8
having fun	1	4	1.9	2.8	4	2	3.2	2.3	1	1	1.9	1.8
health and fitness	2	1	2.0	1.5	3	4	3.0	2.8	3	4	3.2	3.5

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